

Dementia, Caregivers, and the Health Benefits of the Arts

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Abstract

Caring for someone living with a dementia diagnosis poses a burden on caregivers and can have negative consequences on their well-being. Due to the debilitating effects of the disease, keeping the quality of life as high as possible for caregivers is of utmost importance to maintain their ability to care for their loved ones. This research explores the effects of the arts on their health and their role as caregivers. Using a cross-sectional analysis, this study analyzed the arts' benefits to caregivers from various resources. I compared these results against similar studies conducted over sixteen years. This study answers the correlation between the arts, quality of life, and caregivers' overall well-being. Further studies are needed to expand data and establish parameters.

The Impact of Dementia on Caregivers and the Health Benefits of the Arts

Dementia is a disorder affecting the brain that causes a set of symptoms, such as memory impairment, that takes away a person's ability to perform daily tasks essential for everyday living (Alzheimer Association, 2022). The negative impact associated with supporting a person with a dementia diagnosis poses health risks to caregivers. Studies collected by the Alzheimer Association indicated that it could affect their health, overall well-being, and role as caregivers. Quality of life is of the utmost importance in dementia, and the arts play a significant role in helping caregivers and their loved ones thrive, feel useful, and be valued. Each caregiver's challenges vary, so the support they need is personal and individualized. In addition to their struggles, they are often marginalized due to stereotypes and a general public lack of awareness of the diagnosis. The increasing number of people being diagnosed with dementia and no cure available emphasizes the importance of non-pharmacological and psychosocial intervention in the forms of arts to alleviate the effects of dementia and improve caregivers' well-being. The arts can be a universal intervention to address some caregiver challenges, to help ease caregivers' burdens, and to improve their quality of life (Brodaty & Donkin, 2009). For this paper, a caregiver refers to individuals providing direct assistance to a person with a dementia diagnosis and are legally bound by law. In addition, arts are defined as visual, musical, and theater arts.

Alzheimer and Dementia

Dementia is a disorder affecting brain function due to damage to cells that causes a set of symptoms, such as memory impairment, that takes away a person's ability to perform daily tasks essential for everyday living and is not a typical component of aging (Alzheimer Association, 2022). Older age alone is not enough to cause dementia, but seniors above 65 are at risk, the progression is slow, and it gets worse gradually. Some of the symptoms of dementia include difficulties in language, memory, problem-solving, and other cognitive skills. Alzheimer Association (2022) also adds that Alzheimer's disease is one of the causes of dementia and the most common type, deadly, with no cure, and remains the leading cause of mortality among dementia clients.

Dementia caregivers

The cultural backgrounds of caregivers of dementia are diverse. Although women represent two-thirds of the caregivers, mostly age 65 or older, with various cultural beliefs and experiences, caregiving is standard regardless of race or ethnicity and provided care for four or more years (Alzheimer Association, 2022; Alzheimer Association, 2014). Most caregivers of older adults/seniors with dementia are their spouses. They are recognized as essential resources to support dementia clients, but most have health issues of their own and additionally experience caregiving stress (Pienaar & Reynolds, 2015). According to the Alzheimer Association (2022), the total cost of unpaid caregivers providing care to dementia patients is \$271 billion. In addition, with the inevitable progression of the disease, the physical and cognitive decline of the patient, and the change in relationship dynamics, the caregiver may experience anticipatory grief. Alzheimer's Association (2014) states that caregivers support their loved ones for three main reasons: caregivers want to keep the person at home, accessibility, and the recognized obligation.

The Impact of Dementia on Caregivers.

Dementia Can Have Negative Consequences on the Caregiver's Overall Health

Each caregiver's challenges vary, so their struggle is personal and individualized. The physical and psychosocial consequences of dementia to caregivers also vary depending on factors involved such as culture, socioeconomic status, age, and gender (Cross et al., 2018; Alzheimer Association, 2022; Merrilees 2016). The psychosocial impact of dementia to caregivers includes social isolation, anxiety and depression, the burden and stress, and suicidal ideation. Caregivers' perception of the caregiving burden varies depending on their coping ability, age, personality, experience, and social support availability (Cross et al., 2018; Merrilees, 2016). Merrilees (2016) also added dementia's impact on the life of caregivers, feeling of remorse, and defeat are caregivers' burden three domains. As a result, caregivers may experience physical symptoms such as high blood pressure, impaired immune function, bodily pain, sleep disruption that leads to poor quality of sleep, and at risk of developing chronic conditions such as a high level of stress hormones and coronary disease (Alzheimer Association, 2022; Merrilees 2016). In addition, dementia caregivers are more likely to get admitted to the emergency room and be hospitalized and may experience death before their loved one (Crow et al., 2013; Alzheimer Association, 2022).

The Benefits of Arts to Caregivers.

The increasing number of people being diagnosed with dementia and no cure available emphasizes the importance of non-pharmacological and psychosocial intervention in the forms of arts to alleviate the effects of dementia and improve caregivers' standard of living. The arts have the capacity to bring comfort, joy, meaning, and a sense of discovery to all people. It is a catalyst in transforming attitudes towards self-care and perceptions about dementia and the person they care for. They can provide an avenue for caregiver to express any frustration and despair related to their caregiving role.

The Arts Improve the Overall Well-Being of Caregivers

There is growing evidence that programming in the arts can substantially improve seniors' vigor and living conditions. Engaging in the arts can profoundly impact seniors' well-being and enhance their quality of life by promoting autonomy and dignity, encouraging choices, and helping showcase their creative potential (Cohen 2012). Moreover, it enhances older adults' self-esteem and contributes to positive perceptions of aging in the community. The results of studies on seniors participating in creative arts such as art and music include improved social connection, increased self-regard, enhanced life quality, and mental performance (National Institute on Aging, 2019).

Caregivers who engage in creative activities have been positively impacted on various levels (Hutmacher & Schouwink, 2022). These levels of impact include cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. Cognitive level. Participating in the arts alters caregivers' preconceived notions about dementia and persons with dementia. They see a dementia diagnosis not as a liability but as an opportunity, a pleasing encounter, and a new way for people to experience love and affection from dementia clients. Caregivers engaging in the arts change experienced an increased sense of control and motivation.

The caregivers also experienced a generally positive outlook on life and realized the value of arts in memory recall. Emotional. Caregivers who engage in the arts have increased self-confidence, coping mechanisms, and control over negative emotions involving unpleasant dementia experiences. Behavioral. Caregivers who participate in creative activities view dementia as lighter and less visible. It also positively changed how caregivers approach their day in dealing with dementia.

The Arts Promote Social Connections

Caregivers have experienced pleasure and self-affirmation, built their sense of pride and confidence in their creative abilities, and promoted increased social interaction (Pienaar & Reynolds, 2015). The community and camaraderie developed due to the art-making fostering mutual respect and encouragement. In addition, their experience in art-making made them feel more connected to their loved ones. Participating in the arts changes the way caregivers interact with people with dementia and other people. According to Hutmacher & Schouwink (2022), caregivers find creative arts pleasant and enjoyable, promoting connectedness and togetherness.

The Arts Provide Respite to Caregivers

According to Pienaar & Reynolds (2015), respite pertains to a momentary duration of a break or ease from something burdensome or worrisome. Caregivers who participated in the arts describe respite as having the freedom to have time for themselves and the opportunity to step back from their caregiving role. Caregivers have experienced pleasure and self-affirmation, built their sense of pride and confidence in their creative abilities, and promoted increased social interaction. It also gives caregivers much-needed respite from their role to do things independently, relieving stress and a sense of freedom (Pienaar & Reynolds, 2015). Engaging in creative arts, caregivers experienced comfort and happiness. Participating in the art programs made them feel relaxed and distracted from stress and worries related to their caregiving role, and they felt a sense of freedom and accomplishment (Hutmacher & Schouwink, 2022).

Conclusion

The negative consequences of the disease to the caregivers can affect the physical and psychosocial aspects of their lives. The increasing number of people being diagnosed with dementia and no cure available emphasizes the importance of arts to alleviate the effects of dementia and improve caregivers' standard of living. The benefits of the arts are comprehensive and should be utilized to promote their health. Using the arts as the catalyst improves caregivers' overall well-being and makes them feel socially connected and respite.

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